

5-29-1989

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Recommended Citation

Smolski, Chester, "If Europe Can Team Up, Bristol County Can, Too" (1989). *Smolski Texts*. 317.
https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/smolski_text/317

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If Europe can team up, Bristol County can, too

By Chester Smolski

To regionalize or not? That may be the question facing Rhode Island's Bristol County.

It is the smallest of the five counties in the state, with its 24.9 square miles equalling only 6 percent of Providence County, the state's largest at 437 square miles. The three small towns of Barrington, Warren and Bristol that comprise this East Bay peninsula are usually given just a fleeting glance by visitors as they head south for Newport.

Its population is just as small as its land area. Just 47,000 people lived there in 1980—slightly more than the 46,000 counted in Woonsocket and slightly less than the 51,000 in East Providence.

Right now, the three towns are faced with a decision regarding the recycling of waste, which is to take place by September. The state Solid Waste Management Corp. provides an incentive of an additional 10 percent payment if cities and towns work together to handle this service.

But the fly in the ointment is that two of the towns have labor unions and do their own pickups, while Warren hires an outside contractor to collect the refuse. Further, there is the possibility that some of the jobs will become redundant with this regionalized agreement, threatening the jobs' existence. What to do?

The Warren public works director put it aptly when he stated, "Anything that gets the three towns working together to save money makes sense to me." And that is exactly what regionalization can do: It provides economies of scale that are not possible if each of the towns goes off and provides each community service individually.

It is not as if these three towns were many miles apart, making such an arrangement difficult. Just six miles separate the centers of Barrington and Bristol, while the center of Warren lies about halfway between the two.

From a political point of view, though, this may be the longest six-mile stretch in the state. And the sense of independence that New England towns typically exhibit—and jealously guard—too often stands as an obstacle to cooperation.

Profits of cooperation

Regionalization is not an entirely new concept to Bristol County.

It was just three years ago that the school committees of the three towns got together and agreed to purchase supplies jointly. As a result they realized a savings that they could not have gotten if they had gone their own way. The formulation of the Bristol County Water Authority in 1983 caused the three towns to work together to try to bring a water pipeline across Narragansett Bay. These efforts are being watched closely.

Regionalization is moving forward here, but it is a struggle. The waste recycling program remains to be hammered out among the three towns, with opponents working to prevent such cooperation because they do not recognize the value of these joint endeavors. All they need to do, though, is to consider the other examples of regionalization around—and they are abundant—to see the benefits.

It is difficult to imagine three small communities being unable to work it out, especially when one considers that a new Europe will come into being in 1992. Twelve countries as diverse as Spain and Germany or England and Italy will deregulate their markets to allow the free flow of capital across international boundaries. This removal of tariff barriers will establish an economic entity that will have a GNP greater than America's.

In our own country, one of the best examples of regional cooperation is the Tennessee Valley Authority, established in 1933 to control floods, improve navigation, upgrade living conditions for farmers and provide electric power along the Tennessee River.

This highly successful government effort, once called a communist plot, provides the cheapest power in the nation and has achieved its goals for the seven states that share part of the Tennessee watershed.

If countries can do it and if states can do it, why can't three small towns in the nation's smallest state work things out, too?

There are already regional services for water, sewer and waste disposal operating in the state. The Providence Water Supply Board provides water to about 60 percent of the state's population. Communities surrounding Providence use the Narragansett Bay Commission's sewage treatment facilities and 22 communities bring their rubbish to be dumped at the Central Landfill in Johnston.

In order for this type of cooperation to take place, it's necessary for public officials to talk to each other. As simple as that may sound, it isn't being done enough—certainly not to the degree that it's occurring in other parts of the country.

In Indianapolis, the ever-popular Mayor William Hudnut is serving his fourth four-year term in office. The city is operating under a "Unigov" system, where the city and its suburbs joined to create a larger one in 1970. Overnight—literally—it was transformed from the 26th-largest city in the nation to the 12th largest. It is now the 13th largest.

Perhaps one of the best communication devices Hudnut employs is the Greater Indianapolis Progress Committee, a group of 65 community leaders that meets the mayor every month to discuss issues and proposed policies. Hudnut feels that he gets real community help from this advisory group. He feels he can communicate his concerns to them and is able to do this with a city that is one-third of Rhode Island's land area with three-quarters of a million people.

Regionalization, whether it involves three small towns in Bristol County or other communities, is a way to provide better services to the people. Gov. DiPrete is in a position to help bring this about with better communication among the communities. His leadership, applied to this endeavor, could be the catalyst to make it happen.

5/29/89

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